

THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

MILLENIAL MANIA, Y2K, AND ST. PAUL

January 3, 1999
John M. Buchanan

The world will not change until and unless we change: the spirit of Christmas cannot be borne out into the cold January air unless we are borne out by it and indeed born again by it . . . we have seen wonderful things that have come to pass, strange and mighty sights that will never let us look at the skies in quite the same manner as before. Christ's presence has hallowed all that we are and every place that we are, and by his grace the world and we can never be quite the same again. Therefore, we begin again, that in leaving the manger we may embrace the world for his sake and for ours.

Peter Gomes

Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living

FOURTH
PRESBY
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CHURCH



A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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MILLENIAL MANIA, Y2K, AND ST. PAUL
JANUARY 3, 1999
JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 147:1-20
Jeremiah 31:1-7
Ephesians 1:3-10

“... he has made known to us the mystery of his will . . . a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him. . . .”
Ephesians 1:9-10(NRSV)

Dear God, at the beginning of a new year we come to be together in your presence. Time has been suspended for us recently by a wonderful holiday. The hopes and fears of all the years have been placed once again in the gracious context of your love and a child's birth. And time has been suspended again by an amazing storm which has stopped us and our city in our tracks. But now, time begins again, and we return to ongoing responsibilities, and tasks, and challenges, and worries, and the future. So be with us as we begin again, speak your word to us, and startle us with your truth in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

It was the great scholar, Karl Barth, who advised preachers to prepare for their sermonizing by keeping an open Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other. Preachers wise enough to do that this week discovered something one of the papers I read called, “Millennial Mania.” One year from last Friday, the clock and calendar will bring us to a very unique occasion: the end of a year, the end of a century, the end of a millenium. The last time that happened, the numbers were 999 and 1000. The time before that, most of the world wasn't counting, and the part that was used a different system, but if you could somehow get back numerically to the year One, it would be the year that Jesus was born, give or take a few years either way.

So, it's a very big deal, and to read the deluge of print on the subject is to begin to experience millennial mania.

Now I confess that I haven't been able to get into this much yet. Part of my problem is that one dimension of millennial mania has to do with the Y2K crisis, and, given that I don't even know how to turn on my computer (yet—this may be the year, however), I am dependent on others to describe it to me and tell me how awful it is going to be.

Furthermore, if you haven't made plans for how and when you will spend New Year's Eve this year—and the first day of a new millenium—you're probably already too late. All 700 hotel rooms in the tiny Kingdom of Tonga in the remote South Pacific Ocean are already booked. So many ocean liners will be straddling the International Dateline at midnight next December 31—to let passengers celebrate two New Year's Eves a day apart—that crews anticipate a traffic jam at sea. However, there are a few seats left on a long-range jet that will carry 88 passengers to witness and celebrate several midnights—for \$44,950 (*N.Y.T. Travel*, 12/27/98).

I don't know where I'll be. At the moment, I can't think of a better alternative than right here, with good friends, singing favorite hymns, hearing some good poetry and music, thinking about the past and future and God's amazing presence in the amazing story of human history; and probably digging out from a foot of snow!

The millenium has a religious dimension for many people. In fact, there is a strong connection with and appeal to the apocalyptic dimension of faith: the emphasis on the final revelation, the ultimate unveiling of the purpose of the whole project, the event or events that will bring it all to its conclusion, its climax, its end. Religion has always had to do with the apocalyptic. Where we are headed and how it all will end, after all, are essentially theological questions. They are also questions which have a powerful appeal to the human psyche and always have. So, when the calendar brings us to a major millennial transition, there has been and will be a lot of apocalyptic activity. There was in the Year 1000, by the way, when people of faith and superstition (unfortunately more superstition than faith) were convinced that the Year 1000 would set off the events which would bring about the end of the world.

The newspaper that I held in my hand this week warned me to expect "twelve months of panicky millennial excitement." According to a recent Associated Press poll, nearly one in four adult Christians—upward of 26 million people—expect Christ to return in their lifetimes, fulfilling the end-time scenarios that many people glean from prophetic Biblical texts.

Ted Daniels, a Philadelphian, founded "Millennial Watch," and keeps track of the activity of 1200 different millennial prophets—predicting some kind of horrific happening in the near future.

Unarius Academy of Science in California, a mixture of flying saucer theology and past-lives therapy, is awaiting an imminent mass landing of Wise Space Brothers from 32 other planets.

High 54 Ranch, in Arizona, on the other hand, is a survivalist community whose members plan to live through the apocalypse with a year's supply of food and water, a bristling arsenal of guns, rockets, bazookas, land mines, and plenty of ammunition.

Meade Ministries in Florida has concluded that Lake City, Florida is the one place that will survive Armageddon, so 2,000 adherents live together in a guarded subdivision, have established a number of business enterprises which are doing very well, and are building a \$10 million worship center in the form of an over-turned Noah's Ark.

We are in for a very strange 12 months, the article observed (*N.Y.T. Magazine*, December 27, 1998, "Apocalypse Now, No, Really!").

The Y2K crisis feeds neatly into the already aroused paranoia of apocalypticists. Our computers, upon which our civilization has become absolutely dependent, are going to have the high tech equivalent of a nervous breakdown at the very moment that December 31, 1999, becomes January 1, 2000. The problem, as I'm sure you know by now, is that computers identify years on the basis of the final two digits. 97 means 1997; 98 means 1998; 99 means 1999; and 00 means 1900. Unless someone fixes it, the computer thinks it

is January 1, 1900, and simply stops, freezes. Worst case scenarios are that oil refineries shut down, airplanes can't leave their gates or can't find their destinations, life support systems on the Intensive Care Units stop functioning, while foreign countries are quarantined from the global telecommunications network, and the elevators in the Hancock Building stop precisely at midnight, next January 1, 2000, at the 78th floor, stranding you and the neighbor you can't stand for two days!

Now, if you're already apocalyptically stimulated, this is almost too good to be true—a real, honest-to-goodness apocalyptic crisis. Finally, technological credibility for a movement better known for its colossal misjudgments, missed predictions, and general foolishness in the past.

Esquire Magazine sent a reporter to Pat Robertson's Y2K Conference, sponsored by CBN in Virginia Beach. He attended seminars on preserving honey, how to store water and beans; he browsed the bookstore and discovered the *Left Behind* series—about the traffic jams that will result in the wake of the Rapture—when Pat's kind of Christians are whisked off to heaven, leaving automobiles driverless.

He attended a serious lecture by Peter de Jager, an expert in Y2K, who five years ago sounded the alarm in an article in a computer magazine, *Doomsday 2000*. He sat down to hear the lecture, and the man beside him said, "You've never heard him speak? Oh, are you in for a treat. He'll scare the living daylights out of you."

And then, deJager delivered his speech.

Point A: The code is broken—we have to fix it.

Point B: We have a deadline—12:00 a.m., A.D., 2000.

Point C: Computer programmers tend not to meet their deadlines. There will be problems. Count on it. Fortunately, a lot of companies have responded. The situation is improving. Take reasonable precautions. Don't panic. Store a little extra food and water—a few candles and flashlights. Don't take money out of the bank. That's it, Ladies and Gentlemen. Thank you."

And then a strange thing happened. The reporter, Tom Junod, writes, "I looked around. This is a good thing, right? The Big Guy has spoken. He has rendered Y2K in terms of an inconvenience, not an apocalypse. Maybe, just maybe, we'll be spared. So, let's go home, hug our loved ones, celebrate." Instead, he reported, "A loud thunderclap of silence, and then a collective muttering and the first voice I hear is the guy sitting next to me, 'Well, that just burst a lot of bubbles.'"

In an interview later, deJager said, "I have spoken all over the world. I have never gotten this kind of response. Ever."

The writer is a little too quick and too smug in his obvious dislike for Robertson and his disdain for religious fanatics. He is no theologian, but he speaks for many, both without and within the religious community, when he rejects the evangelical Christian, end-of-the-world scenario. "It's spectacularly bloodthirsty, and I never wanted to believe in that God. I never wanted to believe in a God who would make believing in the end a condition of believing in the beginning, who would make believing in the Beast a condition for believing

in the Lamb" (*Esquire*, December 1998, "365 Days to the Apocalypse and They Still Don't Know Where to Hide the Jews").

There is, for my taste, a little too much eagerness for the end, the trials and tribulations, in much of what passes for Christian apocalypticism; a little too much enthusiasm for the final battle, the separation of the sheep and goats, the destruction of creation and the rescue of the faithful. But, it is not merely aesthetic. It is, I propose, a very major distortion of the Biblical tradition and therefore a tragic miscommunication of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We have several millenia of experience in apocalypticism. In fact, our scriptures, particularly the letters of Paul to the early Christian churches in the first century, were written in the midst of a profound sense of the apocalyptic.

Apocalyptic thinking then, as now, was set off by major events in history which seemed out of control. For the early Christians, that dynamic was the harsh, unrelenting, and intensifying persecution by Rome. It is difficult for us even to imagine how horrifying that must have been: tiny, pathetic communities of Christians, designated as enemies of the state, traitors deserving of death; families torn apart, dear ones arrested and executed. So those people hoped and fervently prayed for the end of the world; for Jesus to return in triumph to rescue the faithful and to consign the evil persecutors to the fires of hell. And the worse it became, the more fervently the early Christians prayed for the end. The Book of Revelation is perhaps the most elaborately apocalyptic piece of literature ever written, and it expresses, with specific detail and in metaphor and symbol, the fear and also the hope of early Christianity.

But when St. Paul needed to write to people who were caught up in all of that, he presented an alternative scenario. The question being raised by apocalyptic thinking is the question of ultimate meaning and purpose: where are we headed?; in the midst of this horrific persecution can we see far enough ahead to know what God has in mind, what God's plans are?

Paul, Pharisee, scholar, reached back into the history of his own people for an idea, an image that would communicate truth, all the way back to the exile, and the strong and eloquent prophet Jeremiah, who wrote words of encouragement. The exiles in Babylon surely prayed for God to end it all, to defeat the forces of oppression in a final, fiery cataclysm and deliver the chosen people to paradise. But, instead, the prophet wrote to the exiled people in gentle, warm, gracious images:

"I have loved you with an everlasting love . . .
You shall plant vineyards . . .
I am going to gather them from the farthest points of the earth. . . .
With weeping they will come,
and with consolations I will lead them back."

Our oldest apocalyptic imagery, that is to say, is not violence, retribution, destruction, punishment. Rather, the Day of the Lord is a happy time, a restoration, a reunion; creation will flourish, there will be water and food for everyone; young people will be dancing and old people watching in contentment; mourning will be transformed into joy, and there will

be weeping—not tears of sadness but those precious tears which express a happiness for which there are no words (Jeremiah 31).

So that is the image St. Paul chose to use to address the persecuted Christians who were fervently praying for Jesus to return and end it all—Jeremiah’s wonderful image of God gathering—“a plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in him” (Ephesians 1:10).

That is a very different apocalypse. That is an amazingly gentle and kind picture of what God has in mind for the ultimate purpose and end of creation. We may in fact bring about disaster environmentally. We may set off a nuclear holocaust. But this is not God’s doing or God’s plan—God plans an in-gathering, a restoration, a homecoming, a joyful reunion, a reconciliation—themes which emerge over and over in the life of Jesus, in the stories he told and the people with whom he associated—a putting right of all that is wrong, a forgiving of all evil, a renewal of all good—“a gathering up of all things in him.”

What a contrast to the violent apocalyptic images of conflict, conflagration, the rescue of the few and the death and damnation of all the rest. What a lovely contrast to so very much of what evangelical Christianity has had to say about the end, the purpose of creation. In fact, I am convinced that the contrast is so radical that many do not want to hear it, are disappointed, angry even with the notion that God is not ultimately in the business of settling scores, killing off millions, consigning billions to hell while holding open the gates of paradise for the fortunate 144,000—or the elect, or those lucky enough to have said the required ritual formulas, received baptism, or whatever

“. . . to gather up all things in him. . . .” St. Paul said.

Every year at Christmas, it seems, we have a funeral or two. We did this year. Two friends of mine, in fact. Two men who died years before they should have. And every time it happens, everybody says how difficult it is, in the middle of Christmas, to grieve, to mourn, to go to a funeral. And every time it happens, I find myself agreeing, but also feeling strangely blessed, privileged to put the matter of human death squarely in the context of our most fundamental affirmation—that God so loves the world as to send God’s only Son, not to condemn the world, but to save the world; blessed to put the matter of human purpose and meaning and ending squarely in the context of our best and truest story: of a love so human that it comes among us in a baby; a love so accessible that it lives our life and affirms the uniqueness and sanctity of every human life; a love that looks, with us, into the darkness of the valley of the shadow and does not flinch; a love that is victorious over all things, even death; a love intended, willed by God with God’s infinite intention and will, to be experienced ultimately by all. “All things will be gathered up in him.”

So, in the midst of the Millennial Mania, do keep your feet on the ground, take a deep breath, put a few extra cans of soup on the shelf and a new flashlight in the drawer just in case, but, most of all, hold tightly to the blessed and good truth: “. . . he has made known to us the mystery of his will . . . a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him. . . .,” a gracious plan someone once described this way:

“For lo, the days are hastening on,
By prophet bards foretold,
When with the ever-circling years
comes round the age of gold
When peace shall over all the earth
Its ancient splendors fling,
And the whole world give back the song
Which now the angels sing.”

Amen.